Arabic Literature

Postmodern Perspectives

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SAQI

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Reading the Ruins

Repressed Memory and Multiple Identity in the Work of Sélim Nassib

Christian Junge

The civil war and the process of coming to terms with its repercussions is the main anguished theme of modern Lebanese literature. Confronted with the inconceivability of a fratricidal war, a generation of young writers is searching for new forms of expression capable of grasping this past. In sharp contrast to the usual slogans tagging the conflict as having been a "war of the others" or a "war for others", this generation is seeking to enter into a dialogue with the dichotomous self. The Lebanese-Jewish francophone author Sélim Nassib, born in 1946 in Beirut, experienced the civil war directly while working as a journalist for the French newspaper *Libération*. As a writer, he approaches it from the retrospective.

In the very first days after the war has ended, the nameless protagonist of his novel *Fou de Beyrouth* (1992) relapses successively into the mechanisms which had determined life and behavior in the war years. Totally cut off from the outside world, as if under laboratory conditions, the "insanity" of war becomes manifest once more in this character, the insanity that turns a normal person into a cold-blooded murderer.

The setting of the novel is the "Green Line", the strip of land that once formed the line of demarcation running through the destroyed old quarter of Beirut. Overgrown with weeds, after the war this area quickly becomes a huge construction site for prestigious projects designed to erase the scars of war as quickly as possible. A brochure entitled "Information on the Reconstruction of the City Center" states the rationale behind this building frenzy: "The historic and geographic core of the town, once a place of bustling commercial activity, is in a coma-like state and cloaked in sadness. Today Beirut and the whole of Lebanon awaits its reconstruction with impatience and generosity."

The eccentric protagonist of *Fou de Beyrouth* reveals the mood of a new beginning and the spirit of burgeoning postwar optimism as a naïve belief in peace and opportunism. In a race against the ever-advancing clearing operations, he tries to save the evidence of war, namely the ruins. Instead of disposing of the war rubble, he demands a coming to terms with the horrific past – the ruins are to be a memento.

Vomiting against forgetting

> I believe it is the taste in my mouth that wakes me up. Bitter, nauseous. It was still dark. Nina was not there, I was alone in bed. I switched on the radio and listened. I let the news enter me, piece by piece, like poison. (...) The war is over, the war is over, this thought alone puts me in a state of shock.

In 1990 fifteen years of civil war in Lebanon officially end with the founding of the Second Republic. But the protagonist cannot rejoice. He wanders aimlessly through Beirut's destroyed streets and tries to find an explanation for the war in the ruins.

> The ruins are left all to themselves. Everybody is at home here. Here, the war started, it swallowed public space, before it went elsewhere and didn't think about it anymore. Of course I know that everything is destroyed, but it is not the destruction that astonishes me, on the contrary. It is the vegetation. It has taken possession of the naked body, covered it, and is trying to digest it in front of my eyes, like a pleasant, carnivorous forest.

Under the veil of nature, the city afflicted by war becomes a kind of innocent rainforest. But the nameless figure is not seduced by this "bucolic unreality", neither does he find here a *locus amoenus*. Instead, he becomes a witness of how nature overgrows the city ruins and the human corpses, devouring and decomposing them, and thus downplaying the war as something easily digestible. His body reacts violently against these mighty assimilation processes of nature: it reverses the digestive process. "A small desire to throw up, like a very refined pleasure." For the protagonist, the war is not easily disposable:

> They will say we have never stopped being brothers, a state of mental derangement, the page has to be turned, forgotten, start all over from scratch. They are crazy. Iron and lead have left their graffiti on the walls, on every shadow of a window, they have written history. It is worthless, but that's the way it is.

Following the traces of the ruins leads him to the center of Beirut, and he dares to advance into the prohibited zone, where no one has set foot for years. This area, once the epicenter of the fighting, has become a symbol of the tabooed war. His intrusion is the first breaking of this taboo and gives him access to the "war archive" made up of ruins, the repressed architectural memory. "It is the center of town that consoles me, that comforts my soul. Because it doesn't lie. I look at it and recognize myself."

A war-time Crusoe

A sudden deluge of rain soaks the streets, turning the ground into a mass of mud and causing it to slide, along with the intruder, into a hollow beneath the ruins. He falls into a deep subterranean cathedral, from which there is no escape. "And yet, suddenly, in this rat hole, for the first time I feel protected in an unexplainable way. I am happy." His prison gives him shelter from peace.

> The city has woken up. The whole weekend it has dozed, but now it no longer closes its eyes to the news. It will take revenge. The strain built up over all these years, the explosions, the nights spent in shelters, it will want everything it missed back in one go. The blood will go to its head. I would rather not be there.

The narrator stumbles into a parallel world *en miniature*. He thus shares the fate of the shipwrecked Robinson Crusoe. Far away from civilization, the Englishman managed to establish his old way of life by tilling the land, finding a servant, and keeping a logbook. The protagonist of *Fou de Beyrouth* also remains within his accustomed way of life, namely that of war. Cut off from the clearing work of peacetime, he becomes entangled in the mechanisms and automatic reflexes of civil-war life.

This war-time variation of a Crusoe-like figure begins with the protagonist's fall into the abyss:

> I roll head forward, whatever I eat I spit back out, on my lips I notice the taste of blood, I leave my body to itself like a sack filled with sand, my head hits an object that makes a dull sound, I'm not here anymore.

The metaphysical changes can be read from the estranged perception of his body: it becomes a sack full of sand. The human body is here mere matter without a soul, no longer subject to ethical norms because it no longer acts according to a will but purely instinctively: "Eat, sleep, keep the organism running." Once under the dictate of this materialistic logic, the cruelties of war cease to be an ethical dilemma and become solely an organic problem: "It wasn't a fight anymore, but a disease, a weird virus, a protracted, cancer-causing process."

After all attempts to escape end in failure, the search for something edible begins. By coincidence he stumbles across a cellar filled with plenty of provisions; with his physical needs covered, the struggle to survive ceases for the time being. At this point, just like Robison Crusoe, the wish to return home stirs in the eccentric. As the nameless Crusoe-like figure breaks through the wall of the cellar, crosses the minefield of the "prohibited zone", and reenters postwar Beirut, his way is

blocked by a gang of children. Instinctively he beats a retreat to his "rat hole." "My border is a real one. It's over, I've arrived and there is nothing they can do. I'm on my territory, I'm at home."

Once an unloved prison, his home now turns into a military castle. More and more the character sees himself as the owner rather than a tenant of the theater of war, so that every change is considered a "dispossession" or even "profanation" of his territory. The distinction between the possessed object and the possessor subject wanes successively. The symbiosis culminates in a physical and mental assimilation.

> The traits of the ruins have entered me, they have become a part of my substance. The smallest change is visible immediately, my body reacts instantly, all by itself, just as it would if invaded by a foreign substance.

This dominant sense of ownership of his territorial ground evokes in him an excessive willingness to inflict violence:

> In order to protect my four walls I'll break skulls with my rifle butt, I'll slit open bellies, I'll cut throats, I'll park cars loaded with explosives on crowded streets. All this out of love.

With a critique that reveals Marxist overtones, the moral decay that turns civilians into murderers and fighters into militiamen, a betrayal of ideals and values for material reasons, is described.

At the end of this "ownership spiral", the character no longer controls his possession, but is swallowed by it: the theater of war absorbs him into "its flesh" and turns him into a ruin, a human wreck. When a major thoroughfare is built in the city center as part of reconstruction, he shares the same fate as the ruins: a construction worker hauls him onto his shoulder and carries him away "as if I was only a common bag of bones", while the rubble piles up in the bay of Beirut like a peninsula of debris.

On the remote island Robinson Crusoe successfully overcomes what we may call, borrowing from Heidegger, the threat of his existential *Geworfenheit* ("thrownness"). While in the beginning the island's natural riches provide him with all he needs to survive, later he can even lead a comfortable life by (re-) inventing civilization. The triumph of civilization over barbarism is so compelling and indeed inevitable that even Friday renounces his cannibalistic cravings. In Nassib's Crusoe, set in a war situation, civilization cannot yield the same power. Finding the provisions does not lead the protagonist to live a homely life, but rather, embedded in the logic of war, he is forced to continue the struggle for sheer

survival. Here war triumphs over civilization and indulges in anthropophagic atrocity: *this* Robinson becomes a cannibal.

By all the rules of war

> I didn't go crazy. What I thought before, I still think now. My mind is in a healthy state. Even if it has never been so clear. It is so simple: an incident has tilted me into the logic of war, I simply accept it, it could have been madness to act differently.

Similar to civilization, war also has its own rules and logic. With journalistic clarity and conciseness, Nassib describes the mechanism suspending peaceful civilization. In doing so, the author reveals his adeptness as an experienced war correspondent, masterfully arranging and commenting on the protagonist's recollections:

> Over the years I have observed the mechanisms in the mirror, the catenation of cause and effect, the war that loops into itself. I was fascinated by this kind of insanity, which turns normal persons into murderers.

Once sensitized for the signs of war, it becomes impossible to miss them. Everywhere in Beirut he runs into anthropomorphic ruins, which, as architectural heaps of corpses, tell the story of the buildings and their inhabitants.

> Never have I seen a body tortured to this degree, attacked down to the substance, and still erect despite everything. The whole façade is like a flat face, yellowish-rusty, hollowed out by the numerous wide open mouths, grimaces of shock, black mouths that let out ceaselessly inaudible screams.

In the midst of the horror he runs into a group of kids playing soccer:

> They are born into the war, they know nothing else. (...) Their world is strictly binary: they/we, who resemble us like brothers. Nobody sees them, nobody bothers them. They're wearing uniforms and cover their heads under hoods. They're faceless, simply the tools of an interchangeable death.

Marked by the experiences of gang warfare, the protagonist flees the group instinctively, which only gives them a reason to follow him, for they are conditioned to react to the reflex of taking flight like a predator. What follows is a repeat of the war:

> It's done. In a few seconds I understood that the situation has to turn out for the worse, that it was the only way. I wounded one of these little scumbags

> severely, perhaps I even killed him – I'm positive I killed him – what's happened, happened. They have their martyr, they have to avenge him, that is the supreme law, that's the core. And I certainly won't accept that I obey this law, which I reject, without defending myself. So that's it then, I'll defend myself, nothing more, nothing less.

For his own protection, he splits his territory into a "subterranean kingdom" and observation building. Later, when the construction workers invade his area, he dodges them by moving to the old flea market, where he sets up a fallback camp for himself in a former brothel. To defend this area he develops a tight military surveillance system:

> No one could claim that I underestimate the enemy, no one can say that. It's weird, even my sleep has changed. I'm now capable of waking up exactly every two hours, patrol the area quickly, lie back down and fall asleep again right away, as if nothing had happened.

In the process, he reduces his life to the demands of war and turns himself into a military body par excellence. Dispossessed of his civilian shell by seeing his own obituary posted on the walls, he has become a martyr against his will. This portrait of him on the walls, a minimal ritual for the "killed soldier", has consequently put him in the service of one of the warring groups: "Now I only have to step on to a mine for everything to be put back in order and for everyone to be happy."

In this bitterly fought trench warfare, his desire to provoke the enemy through swift raids increases. "It's dumb, I know that it doesn't make any sense. It is symbolic; I accept it that it is symbolic. The desire is too strong, like the urge to strike back with your fist." This is why he throws a stone at a truck being used in construction work – but his throw falls short of the target and the rock hits a mine. "I have miraculously brought about a full-scale assault. Everybody ready for full combat!" The minor provocation results unexpectedly in a devastating attack which only serves to escalate the spiral of violence.

Although peace is emerging as a tangible reality, the war is paradoxically not over. When a café is opened in the ruins, it seems as if an idyllic place of peace has been created, only for the illusion to be severely shaken shortly afterwards by the arrival of a group of men bearing weapons ostentatiously. The protagonist can make them out easily as former militiamen, "well shaved assassins" who became bodyguards after the war. Although they have changed their profession, they didn't change their manners, behaving as self-confidently as ever before, so that the other customers leave the place with "eyes turned down and backbones bent". For them, peace doesn't possesses the power of a caesura or a new beginning but proves to be just another phase of an ongoing war, because former murderers still live at ease

in the postwar period. The protagonist prefers not to be part of *this* society but rather to be the odd one out.

The lovers

During the war the protagonist had met the twenty-eight-year-old Nina, who lost her husband in a shelling attack, which she herself only escaped by a miracle. "She had concluded from this that another life had been given to her, a second life, Baksheesh." She formed a new opinion of the war through this experience, paying no attention to the political situation in the newspapers and on television, and not bothering to scamper for the bunker when danger arises. Instead she led a life that totally ignored the war: she left the light on at night and did not avoid standing at open windows. "Nina talks about everything, except about the war, she never talks about that." Without a single word, they became lovers. "My life has become impermeable, it runs in fixed tracks, out of reach. It's becoming clear to me now that my world was perfect."

One day Nina simply disappeared, an event that the protagonist pushed aside during the days of war. As peacetime dawns, he is unable to share the general mood of optimism because he is waiting for her to return. Unable to face up to this new reality without her, he flees to the empty center of the city, where, as in the war days, he can manage to ignore her absence. Here all his contradictions come to the fore: while on the one hand, he wants to keep alive signs of the past, on the other he tries to repress them. Only as the ruins are being transported away does he dare to read them: Nina is dead. One night during the war he had switched on the lights, drawing the attention of several militiamen, who then broke into his apartment and killed Nina. He hid in a wardrobe, from where he, as tragic hero, had experienced and survived the murder of Nina, for which he was responsible. After this he had fallen into a deep sleep of oblivion, forgetting the incident until he awoke as peace dawned. Here one can see the irony of fate at work: for him, Nina has died when peace is declared.

Mad about Beirut: a madman from Beirut

The tragic hero of *Fou de Beyrouth* is named Fou by the outside world: an eccentric madman, a crackpot, or a lunatic. But he is not insane, only lovesick. He is consumed by his longing for Nina. Behind this stands the old Arab legend of the unfortunate love between Qays and Layla, who are forbidden from marrying because of tribal conventions. As Layla then reluctantly marries another man, Qays goes mad, in Arabic: *majnun*. Lovesick, he retreats to the desert and becomes the poet of his unhappy love. Obsessed by Layla, he turns into *majnun Layla*.

At first glance, the constellation of the couple Layla-Majnun seems to have nothing to do with the love between Nina and the eccentric madman, for the two lovers from Beirut seem to have lived their love, albeit for a limited time. During the war they enjoyed peace, a relationship that ignored the compulsions of war. But it is precisely because of this lack of concern that the madman was responsible for Nina's death. Afterwards he flees the war and is only confronted with her death when peace invades his ivory tower and calls him to account:

> Even our beautiful souls should be part of the fuel. The fire has spread. Nobody was innocent, no one, not even us, I've needed a long time to admit it. I was reprieved for ten years, that's clear to me now. Ten years with Nina, just for the two of us alone, out of time. But even so, I didn't escape. My encounter with myself took place here, now, in the belly of this city, this cave of the living dead.

In peacetime he cannot relive the relationship with Nina, because Nina is dead. Inevitably, he falls back on his wartime relationship: he represses her disappearance up until the point where he – now insane – withdraws to the ruins. There he shares Majnun's fate: he consciously surrenders to an unhappy love.

Unlike the Arab legend, where the fulfillment of love is prevented by tribal conventions, in *Fou de Beyrouth* it is the war that intrudes. This twist to the traditional Majnun-Layla story is prefigured in the poem "Le Fou d'Elsa" (1963) by Louis Aragon. This love story is set in Andalusia at the time of the *Reconquista* (Reconquest), when the Catholic monarchs recaptured the Iberian Peninsula from the Moors. With any chance of realizing his love thwarted under Arab rule, Majnun sets his hopes in a change of power. These hopes are dashed, however, and while living as a recluse in a grotto near Granada he gazes into the future, only to see that even the twentieth century will not be ready to accept that "the time of the couple" has come. The impact of the Second World War is simply too great:

> To be happy eyes needed not be shut,
> Nothing heard
> But nowadays, since there are so many unloved ones
> That to live means burning and wind tastes like ashes
> Our blood is rushing
> All happiness, oh my happiness, one could have had it
> By not knowing
> But not to know, can one really pay the price
> The world is here; we are part of the suffering
> Whether one wants to or complains

> There is no happy love, you know this
> It can be sung.

In an interview with Francis Crémieux in 1964, Louis Aragon explicitly makes the connection between *Le Fou d'Elsa* and everyday reality:

> And what astonishes the distanced observer [Majnun] here again is the impossibility of happiness amidst the general unhappiness. For if there is no happy love in the time of Elsa, then, I repeat, because one has to be egoistic to be happy amidst the misery of others. As an example I think about the huge furor that the fact of a war in Algeria could have on contemporary youth.

In *Fou de Beyrouth* the protagonist is both a madman from Beirut and mad about Beirut. As the former he is a lover from Beirut who loses his beloved through the war. Despite his perfectly cloistered bliss of love, he has not remained innocent in terms of the war, and thus in relation to Nina's death. "LOVE OH / TO SAY THAT YOU ARE HAPPY / WHAT PECULIAR EGOISM" is the message the Fou of Granada eventually scribbles on the wall of his grotto. Under the aegis of peace, the "time of the couple" could now have arrived for the lovers from Beirut, allowing them to live out their love without egoism. But Nina is dead – and in any case the postwar period is anything but innocent and pristine. The "time of the couple" is yet to come.

Consequently, we encounter here a madman possessed with a radical will to remember, a willingness to face up to guilt without evading accountability. This paradox became politically possible in the 1990s when a general amnesty was declared, only a few assassinations excepted. In 1955 Heinrich Böll commented on the German memoir literature of the postwar years, cuttingly calling such a form of self-amnesty "human equanimity", "the tired shoulder shrug of Pontius Pilate, who washes his hands in innocence." The will to remember of the *Fou de Beyrouth* is accusatory, at the same time renouncing the usual slogans laying the blame elsewhere, the "war of the others" or the "war for the others". Instead, the madman examines his contradictory self for an explanation and finds that both victim and perpetrator reside in his innermost self. In his refusal to resolve this contradiction in innocence, one can locate a thematic affinity to another postwar literature, that of Germany. In Wolfgang Borchert's play *The Man Outside* the conscience of an entire people, both perpetrators and victims, ticks on:

> And then comes the one-legged man-tick-tock-tick-tock (...) and walks through the life of his murderer-tick-tock-tick-tock! And I am the murderer. I? I, the murdered, I whom that they have murdered, I am the murderer? Who protects us from becoming murderers? We are murdered each day,

> and each day we commit murder! And the murderer Beckmann can stand it no longer, murdering and being murdered. And he screams in the face of the world: I die!

Nassib's nameless protagonist shares a similar fate. His experience as a Crusoe-like figure of war has made him a victim and perpetrator at once. Similar to Borchert's Beckmann character, no one wants to hear or see him. The city center of Beirut thus becomes his voice, the suffering of the war finding an architectural analogy: the ruins. The relationship he enters and fosters with them is incredibly intimate and close. He becomes obsessed with Beirut, indeed possessed by the city, and so crazy about it, a *Majnun-Bayrut.*

> They want to flatten it [the center], they want to erase it, that's what they want! One is better off dying. I alone know the secret hidden under these lifeless rocks. It is not meaningless that the war has destroyed specifically this place. It didn't create anything but this piece of art, this monument that is dedicated to its own stupidity.

In this extraordinary twist to the Majnun-Layla legend, the lovesick man becomes not a poet but the protector of the inadvertent poetry of war. The ruins, this artwork of war, are not distractive entertainment but seek confrontation. An unsightly stigma, they are steamrollered by the grinding wheels of peacetime, a Beirut being built with "impatience and generosity" and stripped of memory. The protagonist turns against this architectural imagination of a future without a past, the more so as it would not be able to give him back his Nina or the Beirut that existed before the war. Instead of "disposing of the war" he demands "confronting and coming to terms with it":

> They have lost their minds, they believe that the ruins won't take revenge. They don't realize that something has happened here, one even doesn't know what. If they bury them [the ruins] like that, it will reappear somewhere else.

Layla and Majnun of the Orient

In his work *Oum,* published in 1994 and translated into English in 2006 under the title *I Loved You for Your Voice,* Nassib once again takes up the *Majnun-Layla* legend. By means of the fictive memoirs of the poet Ahmad Rami, he allows the reader to take part in the public and private life of Umm Kulthum, the most famous singer in the Arab world. For nearly her entire life Rami, the impeded lover and preferred poet, has escorted the diva through all her ups and downs. Ostensibly, then, we have an entertaining novel about the biggest star of Arab music; beneath

this glittering surface, the novel is also a thoughtful biography of an artist who sacrificed love for her unrivalled fame.

As with Layla and Majnun, unhappy love is the fulcrum of the novel. In the case of Ahmad Rami and Umm Kalthum it fails not because of the strict dictates of tradition but rather due to the singer's insatiable thirst for success; she, having grown up in poor circumstances, wishes to marry into the upper echelons of society. She thus voluntarily renounces her love of Rami – as well as other suitors – in her unbridled desire to become a singer, a singer possessed by love, a *majnuna*. It is this image of an unhappy lover that advances her career and enables a broad audience to identify with her "fate".

> Every single one of us has an unsatisfied desire. My poetry brought this feeling that something is missing; in her mouth it turned into something that the whole country spared. Her voice lulled the anger and the pain, the yearning for a world to come that didn't want to come.

Whenever she lends her voice to rulers, such as the Egyptian President Nasser, the "twosome" love is elevated, sometimes directly, sometimes allegorically, into patriotism. In the Arab legend, Majnun is a poet who creates an ideal image of Layla as a compensatory substitute for the beloved he has lost in real life. When the real Layla visits him in the desert, he is unable to recognize her. He has drifted too far from reality. Against this background, *Oum* gains political brisance, because it dares to broach the topic of how "escapist idealism and fear of realization" are seemingly inherent to nationalist dreams.

In Nassib's novel, the Umm Kulthum character lends itself not only to being interpreted as *majnuna*, but also as a Layla for her countless listeners and admirers. As such, the "Star of the Orient" offers a tempting projection space, not only through her art, but also as an unreachable diva. Commenting on this, Nassib writes: "Arabs define themselves through Umm Kulthum. I give them a glance in the mirror, one that also shows ugly spots. It would not be amiss for them to think about idolization and about themselves a bit."

Borderlines

While *Fou de Beyrouth* and, to a lesser degree, *I Loved You for Your Voice* deal with strategies of memory repression, displacement and escapism, the other weighty theme addressed by Sélim Nassib is identity. In the novel *The Palestinian Lover* (2004), Nassib narrates the doomed love story between the Palestinian aristocrat Albert Pharaon and the young Jewish Zionist Golda Meir, who later became Prime Minister of Israel.

> An impossible story? *Almost* impossible, obliged to unfold in the tiny space of this *almost*, where things that should not happen do happen, the narrow patch of earth where forbidden flowers grow, instinctive impulses, life itself.

This novel explores the "narrow patch" where one can step outside the well-defined lines of identity and cross the border of societal norms. This is prefigured in earlier works, for example the novel *Clandestin* (1998), in which Nassib highlights the "multiple identity" of a Jewish Lebanese boy whose first language is French; hardly a surprising constellation for an author of the Jewish faith who grew up in Lebanon, regards French as his native tongue, and speaks fluent Arabic. Nor can it be surprising that inclusive identities are replaced by patchwork identities in his work. Life is no longer played out within the confines of firmly established borders, but rather along them, a phenomenon Homi K. Bhabha characterizes as "border life" in *The Location of Culture*:

> These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.

The novel *Clandestin* shows how one can help shape his or her own identity. Following the model of inner-city adventure novel, a boy named Jussuf finds a way out of the narrow confines of a local small street and enters the turbulent life of the large city of Beirut. Confronted with a multitude of different ways of life, the greatest adventure awaits him there: the search for his own identity.

Tom Sawyer learns Arabic

> My father is Iraqi and my mother is from Syria. I was born in Paris. We live next to the lighthouse, on the other side of town. I'm visiting a friend. His name is Fuad. Fuad Hussein. My religion? Muslim, that is too risky. Let's say Christian. I should know more about Christianity than them.

Jussuf, the main character of the novel, attends a Jewish school in Beirut. He speaks French as his native tongue and is bored to death with the lack of anything exciting to do in his street. "I could have been a witness to violence and hate, of obscene gestures. But this street is so calm (...). Only normal people pass here. (...) Where is it, *the other street*?" He yearns for great adventure, like Tom Sawyer. To get away from his sheltered life at home, both use, among other things, what Mikhail M. Bakhtin called the "carnivalesque" power of language. While Tom

Sawyer discovers the inimitable slang of Huckleberry Finn, Jussuf has to switch into another language.

> Arabic is reserved for the communication with grocers or maids, but it is also the language of all the dirty things. Fucking, cock, whore, pimp, masturbate, and to play for a sucker, all these words don't exist in French. The French language is as well raised as I am, in a small velvet costume with straps and satin shirts, an innocent little boy of his mummy, obedient, almost gay.

Seemingly impotent, French loses its appeal when up against vulgar Arabic. When Jussuf meets Fuad, the only Muslim in his school, he finds his ideal counterpart. Through him he discovers the other language. One day they skip the elaborate funeral service held for an important rabbi and visit Fuad's family in the Muslim part of town.

> The sidewalks are just like the ones in my quarter, grey with small checkers that make you dizzy. The buildings are the same (...). The same dust, the same red sand between the cobblestones. I have never been here, I'm sure of that. And that is the exciting thing. Everything is familiar and unknown; one could say it is a projection of my quarter just much bigger. A grown-up town compared to my childlike town. It's like walking around in a dream, where I recognize everything without recognizing it. *The other street*, maybe it is here.

But he is soon confronted with his otherness: "The pedestrians look at me curiously. Maybe I'm too young to walk around by myself, or could it be my clothes, my air. I definitely have to be like everyone else, but what is everyone like?" Here the naïve astuteness of a Tom Sawyer is already evident. On a par with his thirteen years, he poses seemingly simple questions which though undermine standard answers. By asking "but what is everyone like?" he doubts the conception of the homogeneous mass for the first time and goes on to "deconstruct" the notion. His questions about identity have a maieutic effect: like the Socratic art of dialogue, they induce new answers. Through this mode of questioning, Jussuf finds out that he is not Syrian, even though his mother was born in Aleppo, and that, even though his father was born in Baghdad, he is not an Iraqi, because neither have Syrian or Iraqi papers. Then again, they are not Iranian, although they hold Iranian passports. Their Arabian accent is Jewish, and is very similar to that spoken by Syrians, but stands out from the Lebanese Muslim and the Lebanese Christian.

In the end, religion, origins and family turn out to be less relevant to his identity than his accent. Obsessed with the idea of wiping out the Jewish accent in his Arabic, he takes lessons from Fuad. He no longer wants to be noticed in the "other street", and he soon achieves his goal, which affords him unlimited access to the

other world. By learning the accent perfectly, Jussuf the imitator has reached his goal: he has become a counterfeiter of identity.

The self-defined "rite de passage"

To escape the father's high gambling debts, the family decides to flee secretly to Israel on Jussuf's bar mitzvah, the Jewish celebration of initiation that witnesses a young man becoming a full member of the community. Jussuf had hoped to attract the attention of all the girls and women present, in the expectation that he would be able to lose his virginity. Now that his bar mitzvah has been cancelled, he decides to take matters into his own hands. On the last night, a few hours before the planned flight, he and his friend Fuad go to a brothel. Instead of waiting for official initiation into the Jewish community, he has celebrated his own *rite de passage*, with and in front of Fuad. The religious ceremony is turned into a profane celebration, which though is no less the forging of a communal bond. "Fuad and I are brothers forever."

Jussuf returns home late, just as the night is coming to an end. From afar he sees his parents waiting for him, only for the Syrian police to turn up and arrest them. In this moment Jussuf decides to follow them and jumps on the truck loaded with the furniture.

> I cannot start to escape. (...) If one day I leave this place, then it will be my own wish. Until then I'll stay in the Orient. My proper place is here, hidden.

Clandestin most certainly contains autobiographical traces of its Jewish Lebanese francophone author. Nevertheless, the interest in the self, whether autobiographical or fictional, is not to be equated with narcissistic navel-gazing. Far removed from any monologue, Lebanese literature discovers in the self a cultural polyphony characteristic of Lebanon. As the son of Syrian-Iraqi parents, the Jewish Tom Sawyer learns to overcome the narrow, constrictive borders: the borders of accent, language, and religion. The protagonist counteracts this polyphony with a multilingualism that sees his multifaceted identity not as a handicap, but as a chance he has to seize.

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